

VZCZCXRO6422
OO RUEHHM
DE RUEHHI #1360/01 3491228
ZNR UUUUU ZZH
O R 151227Z DEC 09
FM AMEMBASSY HANOI
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0568
INFO RUEHHI/AMEMBASSY HANOI
RUEHHM/AMCONSUL HO CHI MINH CITY 0248
RUEHPF/AMEMBASSY PHNOM PENH 0021

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 HANOI 001360

SENSITIVE
SIPDIS
STATE FOR EAP/MLS, PRM/A, DRL/AWH AND DRL/IRF

E.O. 12958: N/A
TAGS: [PREF](#) [PHUM](#) [SOCI](#) [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [KIRF](#) [UNHCR](#) [CB](#) [VM](#)
SUBJECT: Embassy Monitoring of Montagnard Returnees in Gia Lai Province

REF: 08 HCMC 682; HCMC 28

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: On December 10, Poloff visited three recent Montagnard returnees in Gia Lai province. All three affirmed that they traveled to Cambodia for economic reasons with the long-term goal of resettlement in the U.S. None reported harassment by local officials prior to fleeing Cambodia, or since their return to Vietnam. The experiences of the three individuals reinforces our view that returnees were economic migrants and suffer from poverty, rather than political or religious persecution back in Vietnam.
END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Poloff visiting the Central Highland province of Gia Lai December 10 to monitor the situation of three recent Montagnard returnees. Poloff first visited the home of Siu H'Lip, a 20 year old female of the Jarai ethnic minority in Nhan Hoa Commune of Chu Se District. H'Lip, the oldest of seven children in a home without a father, said she went to Cambodia in 2007 seeking employment, with the long-term goal of resettlement in the U.S. She paid VND 8 million (approximately \$450) to get to Cambodia. She lived and worked in Phnom Penh for nearly 16 months before her application was rejected by UNHCR and she was deported in April 2009. H'Lip said she had not experienced political harassment since being returned to Vietnam. She chose not to elaborate on the work that she did in Cambodia, and remained quiet when asked why she didn't want to return to Vietnam. The local village chief who sat in on the meeting interjected that female returnees were frequently shunned by others in the community because villagers presume the returnees have engaged in prostitution. As a result H'Lip likely would have a difficult time getting married or starting a family, he added. The two other females who traveled to Cambodia with H'Lip were subsequently resettled in the United States, according to H'Lip.

¶3. (SBU) Poloff also visited the Jarai family home of Kpa Thanh in Ia Ko Commune of Chu Se District and spoke with both Kpa Thanh and his wife. Thanh answered all of Poloff's questions without hesitation even though he was in the presence of four local officials (village chief, two sub-commune chiefs, and a member of the commune's ethnic and religion committee). He said that he left for Cambodia in September 2007, and his wife and three children followed him in February 2008. Their goal was to be resettled in the U.S. They were returned to Vietnam in May 2009, after UNHCR rejected their refugee applications. He said that he spent a total of VND 6.5 million (approximately \$360) to get his entire family to Cambodia (more than double his stated annual income of VND 2.5 to 3 million). Thanh said he and his family went directly to the refugee camp across the border and that he did not seek employment, though he admitted that he was motivated by economic concerns. Thanh complained he and his family suffered from hunger and did not have enough to eat due to an ongoing drought and damage to their crops from two large tropical storms; the local village elders

appeared uncomfortable with this assertion. He did not report harassment.

¶4. (SBU) All three returnees admitted to traveling to Cambodia for economic reasons in order to seek resettlement in the United States. While they admitted that they were occasionally visited by local officials and police, they said they did not fear reprisal for their attempts to leave Vietnam. Thanh informed Poloff that his family continued to benefit from state-sponsored social welfare programs that provide salt and rice to poor families. Both Thanh and H'Lip claimed to be Protestants who worshiped at home. Thanh said that he previously had attended a "Dega Protestant" Church, but said that authorities had prohibited individuals from leaving their village in order to gather for religious services following mass demonstrations in 2001 and 2004. The returnees told Poloff they were only informed about the meeting a few hours in advance, and had not received contact information regarding Consulate HCMC's resettlement programs from UNHCR as required under the Montagnard Action Plan (Ref A). (NOTE: Poloff used a questionnaire designed by PRM/ANE with input from former Humanitarian Resettlement Section Chief to conduct returnee interviews (Ref B). Questions cover family background, community composition, livelihood, why and how returnees traveled to and from Cambodia, religious practice, treatment by the government, assistance received, and a self-assessment of needs. END NOTE.)

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¶5. (SBU) Comment: These three cases illustrate that, like previous Central Highland ethnic minorities who have been repatriated to Vietnam, economic imperatives -- not political or religious oppression -- motivate most returnees to leave the Central Highlands to apply for refugee status in Cambodia. Poverty, not politics, is what afflicts most. End comment.

¶6. (U) This cable was coordinated with Consulate HCMC. Michalak